



# **Catholic Faith, Life & Creed**

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## **Breaking Open the Word**

by Mary Birmingham

## **Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity A**



Andrej Rublev. Angels at Mamre: Trinity.



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### Prayer of Thanksgiving to the Trinity

O Eternal God! O Eternal Trinity! Through the union of Your divine nature You have made so precious the Blood of Your only-begotten Son!

O eternal Trinity, You are as deep a mystery as the sea, in whom the more I seek, the more I find; and the more I find, the more I seek. For even immersed in the depths of You, my soul is never satisfied, always famished and hungering for You, eternal Trinity, wishing and desiring to see You, the True Light.

O eternal Trinity, with the light of understanding I have tasted and seen the depths of Your mystery and the beauty of Your creation. In seeing myself in You, I have seen that I will become like You.

O eternal Father, from Your power and Your wisdom clearly You have given to me a share of that wisdom which belongs to Your Only-begotten Son. And truly has the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from You, Father and Son, given me the desire to love You. O eternal Trinity, You are my maker and I am Your creation.

Illuminated by You, I have learned that You have made me a new creation through the Blood of Your Only-begotten Son because You are captivated by love at the beauty of Your creation.

O eternal Trinity, O Divinity, O unfathomable abyss, O deepest sea, what greater gift could You give me than Your very Self? You are a fire that burns eternally yet never consumed, a fire that consumes with Your heat. Again and again You are the fire who takes away all cold heartedness and illuminates the mind by Your light, the light with which You have made me to know Your truth.

By this mirrored light I know You are the highest good, a good above all good, a fortunate good, an incomprehensible good, an immeasurable good, a beauty above all beauty, a wisdom above all wisdom, for You are wisdom itself, the food of angels, the fire of love that You give human beings. You are the garment covering our nakedness. You feed our family with Your sweetness, a sweetness You are from which there is no trace of bitterness. O Eternal Trinity! Amen.

St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Doctor of the Church

## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity segues us back into Ordinary Time. Trinity Sunday is one of the four solemnities of the Lord during Ordinary Time. It is called an “idea feast.” An idea feast expresses focus on a particular truth or element of Christian teaching. Such feasts arose in response to some trial within or outside the church such as heresy. The four solemnities include Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christ, Sacred Heart and Christ the King.
- ▶ This feast arose over the centuries, initially as a result of the Arian heresy that denied the divinity of Christ. When the idea of the divinity of Christ was threatened, the idea of the doctrine of Trinity also came under threat. By the year 1,000 this feast was in place and situated after the feast of Pentecost. (See Word and Worship Workbook, Year A, Mary Birmingham, Trinity Sunday: “liturgical context” for a more through treatment of this feast.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today’s liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today’s Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## Reading 1: Exodus 34: 4b-6; 8-9

- ▶ God revealed himself to our ancestors in the faith.
- ▶ God was involved in the activities of human life.
- ▶ God was understood by the actions God performed. It was a common practice to refer to God according to some action God performed such as “The God who parted the waters in order to free the people from slavery.”
- ▶ God desired intimate relationship with the people. He entered into a solemn, holy covenant with the people.
- ▶ God promised to be their God and they would be his people.
- ▶ The Exodus was (and is today) to the Hebrews what the Christ event was (and is) to the people of the new covenant.
- ▶ God entered into a covenant with the people at the creation of the world. God promised to be their God—to care for them and provide for their needs.
- ▶ They in turn would reciprocate by loving God with their whole, heart, mind and soul, and love their neighbor as much as self and care for God’s creation, the earth and those who could not care for themselves.

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- ▶ This covenant was manifest when God led the people out of slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land.
- ▶ Moses brokered the covenant between God and the people.
- ▶ God showed Moses how limited human beings are in their ability to see and understand the ways of God. Human beings simply do not have the capacity to understand God.
- ▶ God must intervene and reveal himself to human beings if they are to know him.
- ▶ The only way human beings can grasp the mystery of the Trinity is for God to reveal himself within the mystery.
- ▶ God spoke to Moses. God always takes the initiative.
- ▶ Human beings simply do not have the power to control God; it is pure arrogance to think otherwise.
- ▶ God is transcendent. Human beings will always seek to plumb the depths of his mystery, but we will never fully plumb those depths.
- ▶ God by his very nature and essence can do no less than love his creation with perfect love, regardless of their behavior. His love is completely gratuitous and unmerited.
- ▶ So holy was God's name considered that Israel was not allowed to speak it. The people referred to God in descriptive terms, "Holy," Most High," "Lord."
- ▶ The name "God" was unutterable.
- ▶ God is known by his qualities; God is merciful, just, forgiving, powerful, and omniscient.
- ▶ God desires intimate union with God's people.
- ▶ God continues to invite conversion in the hearts of believers.
- ▶ While the mystery of God will never be fully plumbed in our time, God invites us to enter more deeply into the mystery that lives within us who is God.
- ▶ Moses prayer in today's reading from Exodus is a timeless prayer of humble submission to God. He prayed it on behalf of every sinner of every generation: "...pardon our wickedness and sins, and receive us as your own."
- ▶ Every effort we make to fully know God is a limited effort. We will spend a life time growing in our knowledge and in intimacy with God.
- ▶ Christ gave us the perfect icon upon which to gaze as we reflect upon that intimacy; it is Christ himself.
- ▶ Even though there is no direct allusion to the Trinity in the Old Testament, there is an observable triadic pattern that echoes the life of the Trinity. It is found in the very act of God's self revelation to the world. God gives humanity the ability to know him through this revelation. Thus the Trinity is echoed when 1. we see God being God's self—in God's own essence and 2. when God goes out from himself to manifest himself to the world and 3. When Moses responded to God's initiative on behalf of sinners everywhere in every generation.
- ▶ God proclaimed his mercy and covenant love for the people of Israel in the Exodus event.
- ▶ God continues the covenant—the final and ultimate covenant—with the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ and Sending of the Holy Spirit.





## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ In what way does this reading from Exodus reveal the Trinity?
- ▶ What is the good news in this reading?

### Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 13, 11-13.

- ▶ Today's reading was intended to be read in the Christian assembly, probably before the Eucharistic celebration.
- ▶ The community is encouraged to share a sign of peace with one another.
- ▶ This holy kiss normally took place before the Eucharistic Prayer not afterward as it presently occurs.
- ▶ Paul prays in the name of the Triune God. He is celebrating the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of the gathered assembly of believers.
- ▶ He refers to love, communion and fellowship in his address. He orders the relationship according to Son, then God, then the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ His order reflects the experience of the community. The community experienced the face of God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit who is with us as we live the Christian life in community.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ What is your experience of God?
- ▶ To whom do you pray the most, Father, Son or Spirit?
- ▶ What is your experience of the Most Holy Trinity in your life as a Christian or believer? How would you explain the role of the Trinity in your life to an interested inquirer into the faith?

## Gospel: John 3: 16-18

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

### Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
  
- ▶ Today's Gospel has been referred to as a summary of John's entire Gospel, albeit Jesus' entire mission.
- ▶ Jesus is God's Son sent, not to condemn the world, but to save it. Period. All are saved through Jesus, the Christ.

Catechist invites reflection on one or more the following questions as time allows.

- ▶ If you were Jesus' advocate in a court of law and were asked to give evidence that Jesus is who he is says he is---what evidence would you give?
- ▶ First, what did Jesus say about himself and second, what did his followers believe about him?
- ▶ What evidence would his defenders be able to give to prove he is who he says he is?
  
- ▶ Ultimately the resurrection of Christ cannot be scientifically proven. But it can be attested to by witnesses.
- ▶ The Gospel witnesses to what Jesus said and what he did. Disciples were firsthand witnesses to Jesus' life, his work, his ministry and his mission.
- ▶ In spite of the living witnesses each person must, however, come to a personal faith in Christ and his mission by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ John's Gospel reveals controversy surrounding Jesus' mission and ministry. People questioned by what authority he performed miracles.
- ▶ John hints to the underlying controversy surrounding Jesus' life and work by the legal language he uses throughout the text. Much of John's Gospel is a polemic—a posture or agenda that seeks to prove that Christ was who they insisted he was and that his authority to minister came directly from God.
- ▶ Today's pericope heralds a new birth in the Holy Spirit that is brought about by the paschal event of Jesus' death and resurrection.
- ▶ The best way to get inside the heart of John's Gospel is to understand what was taking place at the time it was written. John's Gospel was written near the year 90 AD, after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Jewish faith became centered in the synagogue and in the home. Judaism maintained its identity by faithfulness to Scripture and the synagogue.
- ▶ Jews and Christians experienced a contentious relationship at the time John's Gospel was written. Jews created eighteen benedictions that were to be prayed each day. They included a benediction that condemned Christianity. Christians, under the protection of legally sanctioned Judaism, were expected

- to pray the prayer each day as well. If they refused to pray the benediction against Christianity they were suspected of heresy and thus expelled from the protection of the Jewish community—a legal religion.
- ▶ Needless to say, emotions were rife with animosity.
  - ▶ John addresses the controversies of his day; thus the courtroom language in today's pericope ("whoever does not believe is already condemned...")
  - ▶ We see this controversy in other sequences in John's Gospel. For example, Jesus' prophetic action of overturning the tables in the Temple precinct illustrated that Jesus was overturning more than tables. He was overturning the sacrificial system of the Temple with something completely new. By overturning the tables he was saying in effect, the day of Temple sacrifice is over. He would become the new sacrifice. The atonement offering would be realized in and through his sacrifice on the Cross. Thus the customary ritual practice of sacrifice in the Temple was no longer needed.
  - ▶ This, of course, infuriated the Jews. They naturally asked by what authority he set out to abolish their sacrificial system.
  - ▶ His action was as shocking as it would be today if a person were to make a grand entrance into our Sunday assembly and announce before all that the Mass was coming to an end—that it was no longer necessary.
  - ▶ Wars have been fought over for less!
  - ▶ The Jews were extremely unhappy with Jesus.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites reflection on the following questions.

- ▶ Imagine that someone today would do what Jesus did when he overturned the tables in the Temple. Imagine that you are a law-abiding Christian and someone were to come and tell you that your worship was no longer valid and that he was replacing it with something new. How would you respond?
- ▶ Perhaps your first response might be to think the person was mentally unbalanced. Your next response would be to ask him to leave. Yet there was something about Jesus that attracted his followers even when he did such seemingly outrageous actions. What was it about Jesus that allowed some people to see beyond mere appearance and see Jesus for who he really was?
- ▶ If you were living at the time of Jesus with whom do you think you would have sided---with those that wanted to get rid of him, or with those who recognized who he was?
- ▶ What do you think it required of the person to truly recognize Jesus?

### How then does Jesus respond to these challenges?

- ▶ Jesus responds to the question of authority by looking forward to his resurrection—what more authority could be necessary?
- ▶ The disciples would not have their “a-ha” moment regarding all that Jesus had said until after his resurrection from the dead which was all the authority he needs.
- ▶ The Jews wanted proof—some sign they could point to that would legitimate his authenticity.
- ▶ Jesus was not happy with their need for signs, but he understood the human heart with all its frailties.
- ▶ In an earlier segment Nicodemus came to faith in Christ because of the signs he performed. It was believed that such signs were a sign of God’s action and God’s favor.
- ▶ While Jesus understood this, he longed for people to know his true identity without signs.
- ▶ Jesus insisted that a new birth in the Spirit (a new authority) was required for people to fully recognize who Christ was, what his mission came to accomplish and how God was acting in and through him.
- ▶ Drawing upon a common ancient philosophical construct that *like knows like*, Jesus insisted that we must be born in the Spirit in order to recognize God in Christ. In other words when a person is born in the Holy Spirit he or she is elevated to divine status. Once divine the individual is able to recognize the divinity of God.
- ▶ Once glorified through his ascension to the Father’s right hand in glory, Jesus elevated all human nature to the status of divine. We share in his divine nature.
- ▶ Unfortunately since human beings have been gifted with free will, not everyone will choose to believe. Those who turn their backs on God will be judged in kind.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites reflection on one or more of the following questions.

- ▶ The Church teaches that as a result of Jesus becoming a human being, he made the human race so holy that everyone has divine life within them. We are divine creatures: the Scriptures tell us that we are a little less than the angels! Look to the person next to you and tell him or her what evidence you see in him or her of God’s divine life.
- ▶ Then answer the same question about yourself—what evidence is there in you that you are divine—that is, you are gifted with God’s divine life.
- ▶ Ultimately Jesus ushers in a new worship—worship in the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason he has the authority to bring Temple sacrifice to an end. He is ushering in a



new sacrifice borne of the Spirit and his own Paschal Mystery (his life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension into glory and the sending of the Holy Spirit).

- ▶ Without Christ taking human flesh—without the INCARNATION of the Son we would not have access to life in the Holy Spirit. O happy fault, o necessary sin of Adam!
- ▶ Our life in the Holy Spirit is a free, unmerited gift. We can do no less than live committed, righteous lives of discipleship.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that God exists as three in one Persons?
- ▶ While not addressed directly, how does this Gospel shed light on the mystery of the Trinity?
- ▶ How might you relate what Jesus tells his disciples about the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in your life?
- ▶ Do you believe that you have the same access to the Triune God that they did?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that God is active, powerful and leading you as he led those first disciples?
- ▶ What do you need from the Holy Spirit if you are really to go forth as Jesus commanded? What are some ways that you can follow Jesus' command in your own environment?
- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

## Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

## APPENDIX

It is always easy to see divine life in others than it is to see it in ourselves. This morning I had a wonderful conversation with an amazing woman of faith, a parishioner who struggles each day to live out of the divine life within her. Her faith is a beacon to me in times of challenge and stress. She is the mother of a child with Down's Syndrome. While admittedly the advent of this precious child has been the most difficult challenge of her life, she embraces him with hope, love and the knowledge that her life is not her own. He is her greatest gift. She understands her life as a call to sacrifice just as Christ sacrificed for us. She is a reminder to me that the challenges under our noises—our difficult life situations--when approached with eyes of faith bring resurrection, not death and hope, not despair. That divine spark within her reminded me of the divine life within me and within my own ill family member.

Jesus taught us the pattern of descent and ascent. Until we are willing to sacrifice our lives—to suffer—to be brought low—we will have no appreciation for what it means to be raised high. We are supported by friends in faith who show us the divine life within them as a ray of hope for the divine life that shines within each and every one of us. It mirrors the life and love shared by the Father for the Son, the Son for the Father and the Father and Son for the Spirit. What a gift we have been given! I stand in awe!



## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Creed  
Salvation  
Holy Spirit  
Evangelization  
Baptism

The Church and Ecclesiology  
Church Structure  
Sacraments  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### CREED

Jesus sets the foundation for our belief in the Trinity—a core, fundamental tenet of Christian faith, especially in his final discourses in John's Gospel. It is appropriate that we center our attention on what we believe as Christians. Thus, we will focus our doctrinal teaching on the CREED.

### SALVATION

Jesus prepares his disciples for his absence and for the saving mission they will take up after his death in his final discourses with his disciples in John's Gospel. Today's Gospel gives us a glimpse of the salvation God planned for the world since the beginning of time that comes to fulfillment in the Christ event. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal teaching regarding SALVATION.

### EVANGELIZATION

In his final discourse in John's Gospel, Jesus reminds his disciples that the Spirit will go with them to accomplish the saving mission they will continue after his death. We are called to go forth and share what Jesus has given us with those still asleep to his life within. Thus, the focus of today's doctrinal session will be what the Church teaches us about EVANGELIZATION.

### HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus reminds his disciples that he will send the Paraclete in his absence. His Spirit will guide and strengthen the disciples and the Christian community after Jesus' death. Thus, today, the doctrinal focus will be the Holy Spirit.

## **BAPTISM**

Jesus' final discourse with his disciples in John's Gospel of which today's pericope is a part, reminded his disciples that they will go forth to continue his saving mission in the world. They are therefore to go out and baptize all nations in Christ's name through the power of the Triune God. Baptism gives us access to Christ's ongoing life in the world--- presence in absence. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the sacrament of baptism.

## **CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY**

Jesus invites his disciples into union with his Father and with one another. He promises to be with the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church is commissioned to go forth. Today we will focus on the Church and what we mean by Ecclesiology.

## **CHURCH STRUCTURE**

Jesus invites his disciples into union with his Father and with one another. He promises to be with the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church is commissioned to go forth. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the structure of the Church.

## **SACRAMENTS**

Jesus is present to us in the sacraments. Jesus promises to send his Spirit to go forth with his community of believers as they establish the reign of God in the world. We are strengthened to go forth through our participation in the sacraments. Christ's presence and union continues through the generations in the sacraments. Thus, today the doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal issue of SACRAMENTS.

## **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Easter is to the year what Sunday is to the week. Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.